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Rhetorical Listening

Emmett Sanders

There are three types of people in this world: Those who look at dandelions and see weeds, those who look at dandelions and see flowers, and then there is the dandelion who doesn't ask to be either, who only wants to grow, to be what it is and to have a chance to become what it was meant to be.

A bit of fluff in the wind.

Responding to Michelle Alexander's *The New Jim Crow* has been a difficult process for me. Not because I've no thoughts or because I've nothing to say. On the contrary, Alexander's work cuts close to the bone. It has not only inspired new thoughts on discriminatory practices and mass incarceration as a tool of racial oppression, but it has also brought a number of thoughts and feelings that I've been struggling with for quite a while to the surface—questions that have plagued my mind longer than I care to admit.

How is it that people can normalize injustice and atrocity to the extent that they can no longer see horror as horror but, rather, as just “the

way it is”? How can anyone who enters “the system” ever successfully complete their sentence when the stigma of incarceration clings like an indelible stain on the skin, and the discrimination that comes with it is not only legal, but considered appropriate?

These questions haunt me. I'm not going to pretend that they don't or that they are not personal. They are. They are very personal.

As a child, incarceration was not abstract. It was not some distant thought or theory or something you might catch a glimpse of on TV. It was a reality. It was as real as sitting around a dinner table and counting the empty chairs. As real as going to school and hearing the whispers.

Kids would go out to play and exchange stories of the fallen. His father, my uncle, her brother. They'd list names both as an acknowledgment of those gone and as a badge of honor. We show our scars to show our strength. It was also a reminder of the perils that lay ahead of us. Everyone knew about prison, and every-

one knew about the grave. They are the Charibdis and Scylla of our society.

But with these lessons comes a kind of nonchalance. It is not that we were inured, just that we were not surprised. Frustrated, yes. Resentful, absolutely. But not surprised. It would be like being surprised the sun rose. Discrimination was just a part of life.

It still is. The sad truth of the matter is that no one is surprised when a young black or Latino male is arrested. No one is surprised when they are incarcerated. No one is surprised to learn that prison is filled with people of color. No one. Not the people who make the laws, not the people who enforce them, and not the people this skewed legal system enforces those biased laws against. We rage against the dying of the light, but we do so as a matter of fact. As if its dying were a given, rather than an aberration. People are captured, chained, and caged and that's just how it is.

As is the stigma that follows felons after their release. No one in prison is unaware of the obstacles they will face when they emerge from prison. There are those who are hopeful those obstacles may be overcome, those who are determined not to be defined by them or by their past. There are even those who wish to use this experience to help others, to prevent them from falling into the same trap. But there is no one in prison who is unaware of the tenacity with which this label clings. Nor are they oblivious to the restrictions and denials that come with that label. Regardless of what a person was incarcerated for, their incarceration does not end with their release from prison. It is a lifelong sentence imposed by a broken legal system and an "othering" society.

Michelle Alexander's work brings these thoughts to the forefront of my mind, but in truth, they are always close by. I have dealt with racism nearly all of my life and with incarceration for a good portion of it. Every day

I hear horror stories of lost lives and lost freedoms told in the same tone one might use to describe last night's dinner. I have told these stories myself, reflecting with a measure of sorrow on the lack of outrage in my voice. I often ponder life post-incarceration and, as much as I look forward to that life, as hopeful and determined as I am to build a life beyond these walls, I am not blind to the obstacles that await me. I know the challenges that I face, and the stigma of incarceration that will follow me. I am aware of how rare it will be to find those who will see me for me rather than for where I have been.

This is very personal to me. Still, I am reluctant to make it solely personal, which is why this process of responding has been so difficult. The problem Alexander speaks of and the questions she raises are so much greater than I am. They are bigger than what I've felt and seen and experienced. They are systemic, infecting the structure of our society like a cancer that no one is surprised we have. I can speak of it in a personal manner, but I question if that does it justice.

More, though, these experiences are not who I am. They inform me, but they do not define me. I am not a victim of my race, nor am I broken by my incarceration. Bruised, perhaps, but not broken. In responding to Alexander, I cannot help but do so from a personal point of view, but I cringe at the thought that some may see that as the point of view of a prisoner rather than the point of view of a man who has given a great deal of thought to the matter. Because that in itself only reinforces the stigma of incarceration, and the truth of it is regardless if someone sees me as a prisoner to be shunned or as a prisoner to be accepted back into the fold, a prisoner is what they see. A weed or a flower.

I am neither. I am fluff in the wind.